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ABSTRACT

The relationships that exist among the skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening suggest a need for greater attention to oral communication processes in the formal instructional program. The extent of these relationships is such that four national associations drafted a joint paper stating that oral language competency is the basis for success in reading, and students with an adequate facility in spoken language are less likely to suffer reading and writing difficulties. A Right to Read pamphlet states that reading and talking are interrelated skills: enhancement of one contributes to the development of the other. Unfortunately, the pamphlet also suggests that by school age, children have acquired the fundamentals of language and that their sounds system is completely matured. Such an assumption ignores the facts that communication behavior is dynamic, that oral communication abilities develop differently in individuals, and that the effective development and use of each of the language skills is dependent upon continued, systematic, and focused instruction in each. Successful instruction in both oral communication and reading will (1) differentiate between basic skills and minimal competencies, (2) focus on processes rather than products, (3) provide explicit communication experiences, (4) provide opportunities to evaluate the effects of the strategies employed in communicating/ reading, and (5) share in the joy of using language. (HTH)

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ORAL COMMUNICATION AND READING AS BASIC SKILLS

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ORAL COMMUNICATION AND READING AS BASIC SKILLS

From the moment of birth children begin the acquisition of a wealth of perceptual, conceptual, and linguistic experiences. Those of us who are parents fondly remember the years during which we repeated words over and over until our child delighted us by articulating these same words. This was followed by months of pointing to people and objects and naming them for our child. And from this we moved to phrases and sentences. Unfortunately, by the time our child was ready to begin school we began, at the same time, to restrict our parental guidance to corrective instruction (e.g., "Don't interrupt." "Let someone else talk." "Say hello to Grandma." "I don't ever want to hear you use that word again.") We seem, as parents, to assume that once our child has developed simple fluency in oral language usage our instructional task is over, and experience will now become the best teacher.

Educational institutions appear to operate under the same assumption, since attention begins to shift from oral language behavior to print communication forms, reading and writing, once the child enters school. However, the relationships that exist among the basic communication skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening strongly suggest the need for schools to pay greater attention to oral communication processes as well as print communication processes as a part of the formal instructional program.

Teachers of reading, particularly, are concerned with the teaching of oral communication skills. For example, a recent article on reading which appeared in the Chicago Tribune pointed out the "Babies will become better readers if you talk to them as soon as they're born, not just when they're beginning to talk. They'll be learning to listen, getting the idea of communication."[1] We have known for years that it is impossible to isolate reading instruction from other language functions. In Jane Davidson's

"The Language Experience Approach to Teaching Reading" it is noted that "a child's oral vocabulary exceeds his or her written vocabulary," that "some children have language patterns which are significantly different from other children's language patterns," and that it is important that children experience opportunities "to see the relationship between spoken language patterns and written language patterns." [2]

Other examples of the relationship between reading and oral language usage abound in the literature and practices of both fields of study. The Speech Communication Association points out in a recent paper on the essentials of education that studies conducted in recent years suggest that "superior readers use lower levels of egocentric speech, use more complex words and sentence structure when speaking, and speak in longer sentences than do poor and average readers." [3]

Even a cursory examination of a variety of materials used by teachers of reading reinforces the idea of such a relationship. For example, the "Continuous Pupil Progress Profile in Reading published by Zweig Associates lists a number of skills long considered essential oral communication skills by speech teachers including identifying and rephrasing main ideas, comparing and contrasting ideas, identifying speakers, verifying opinion, recognizing emotions, cause and effect relationships, classifying, summarizing, outlining, etc. [4] The "Classroom Diagnosis of Reading Difficulties" is a handbook designed for teacher use in making initial diagnosis in the classroom of reading problems. Among the instruments described in the book is the "Informal Reading Inventory" which utilizes oral language competency as one of three levels of reading competency to be assessed. Specific components of this instrument include oral reading, a listening inventory, and miscue analysis of oral reading. [5]

A check list of common reading skills all teachers should be teaching, published by the Illinois State Board of Education, includes such activities as listening actively in class, selecting main points, critical analysis, integration of new ideas, forming sensory images, organizing ideas, summarizing, making comparisons, etc.[6] All of these are considered by teachers of oral communication to be common oral communication skills. Others, who focus on the relationship between reading and oral communication skills, include Maria Montesori, who points out that "graphic language, comprising dictation and reading, contains articulate language. The manner of development called forth by my method, is based essentially on articulate language."[7] Solomon Clark states that "Reading at the bottom is a speech function. It was preceded by and grew out of speaking. Speech is the basis of human communication. . . . Training in reading, then, is training, first, in recognition of symbols, and, second, in the proper manipulation of these symbols."[8] A series of Right to Read pamphlets prepared by the Illinois Office of Education point out that the development of language ability is a primary concern for language helps determine intellectual development, defines our uniqueness, and enables us to express our personality. Parents are urged to engage in a variety of oral language activities in the home in order to improve reading performance in the schools.[9]

The extent of the relationship between oral communication behavior and reading/writing skills development is such that four national associations; The International Reading Association, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, the Association for Childhood Education International, and the National Council of Teachers of English, drafted a joint paper in which they stated that "competency in spoken language is the basis for success in reading," and "students with an adequate facility in spoken language are less likely to suffer learning difficulties, especially in reading and writing."[10]

The Right to Read pamphlets mentioned earlier provide a summary by stating that reading and talking are interrelated skills. "Enhancement of one contributes to the development of the other." [11] It is this last statement, however, which describes the nature of the problem with communication instruction in our schools today. These pamphlets suggest that by school age children have acquired the fundamentals of language and that the sounds system is completely matured (a questionable assumption). Although it is admitted that other, more sophisticated aspects of language will develop during school years, basically, the assumption is maintained that for educational purposes an oral language system has developed which will remain relatively constant.

Such an assumption ignores some very critical factors in human growth and intellectual development. Namely, that

1. Communication behavior is dynamic, thus it is in a state of continuing change and varying complexity. The development of our oral communication behaviors is a life-long process. Even such a "simple" event as meeting a stranger becomes more complex and difficult the older one gets. A young child may easily say "Hi" and begin playing comfortably with another child, or just as easily ignore the other. The young adult, on the other hand, becomes involved in a complex analysis of a set of variables involving social customs and rituals, consideration of the effects of a relationship, concern for appearances, etc. The situation can become so complex for some people that they go to extreme lengths to avoid meeting new people.

The dynamic and changing nature of communication behavior might also be seen in the example of our use of persuasive techniques. A young child frequently utilizes the ego-centered strategy in attempting to control others' behavior. For example, "Buy it for me, because I want it." By the time they have learned through experience that such appeals are not always successful, many children begin to develop persuasive strategies based on the

other person's perspective. "You want me to be happy/popular/successful, don't you?" Obviously, change has taken place in communication behavior. Unfortunately, many children do not learn from every unsuccessful experience, and the consequence is a person whose persuasive strategies remain those of a young child. A critical need in our schools is the need for instruction which focuses on expanding every child's repertoire of available strategies in communicative situations.

2. Oral communication abilities develop differently in individuals. Education is presumed to be the great equalizer by providing opportunities for every child to fully develop his or her abilities. Experience suggests, however, that the advantage goes to those who are most skilled as oral communicators. The child who is supportive of the teacher and attentive in class, the child who is poised and can adapt to a variety of communication situations, the child who can assume an other's perspective, the child who has a positive attitude rather than a fear of communicating is the child who receives the most support and encouragement. These children continue to develop their communication abilities through positive reinforcement while the child who is an ineffective communicator, in the absence of instruction, continues to be ineffective.

3. Although speaking, listening, reading, and writing are interrelated, basic skills, the effective development and use of each of these skills is dependent upon continued, systematic, and focused instruction in each. In the teaching of reading skills, for example, we have long used the interrelationship among basic skills as an instructional strategy. Oral reading activities are essential to the learning of reading since this process is primarily an oral process, repetition, naming, signifying, and reading aloud. Yet, as teachers, we frequently forget that personal reading and oral reading are uniquely different communication behaviors. The oral reader serves a message source function

in relation to an audience. The personal reader is the audience. The personal reader sets his or her own rate to fit the purpose for reading and the complexity of the material. The oral reader's rate is judged in terms of fluency and clarity from the audience's perception of appropriateness. The personal reader can stop, contemplate, reread, and engage in the cognitive processes most appropriate to personal understanding. The oral reader must procede in a linear fashion. In a sense the oral reader in the classroom is holding a conversation with the teacher who frequently interrupts and corrects the conversation. Although such an approach to oral reading may be useful in learning to read print materials, it can have a negative impact on the development of oral communication abilities and the desire to communicate.

All three of these premises, communication behavior is dynamic and changing, oral communication abilities develop differently in each individual, and the most effective learning occurs when each communication skill is a systematic and focused part of instructional programs, lead to the conclusion that even though basic communication skills are interrelated each skill must be taught as a skill in and of itself. Every child must learn to observe the world, talk about the world, write about the world, and read about the world in which he or she lives.

Successful instruction in both oral communication and reading will

1. Differentiate between basic skills and minimal competencies. The basic skills approach suggests that speaking, listening, reading, and writing are primary learning modes, essential skills in developing critical thought abilities. The minimal competencies approach suggests that education need attend only to survival skills. In effect, once a child has learned to talk our job is done. Once a child has a basic reading vocabulary and can get through his or her primer our teaching task is over. We can take it for granted that through continued use in and out of the classroom that oral communication abilities and reading skills

will continue to be developed by every child.

2. Focus on processes, not products. Our perceptions of oral communication all too often focus on the products of our interactions, the public speech, the oral reading performance, the listening comprehension. Reading activities often focus on recall and recognition measures as though reading were simply an activity with a verifiable quantity of information to be learned. In fact, both oral communication and reading are processes with a variety of functions to be served through a complex cognitive/interactive process. We read and communicate in order to process information, to control the behavior of others, to engage in social rituals, to imagine, and to express emotion. When engaging in these communicative events we must make choices from among our available strategies, implement those strategies, and evaluate the results of the process. The success or lack of success in one situation has important consequences on the communication process in another situation.

3. Provide explicit communication experiences. Much of our instruction in basic communication skills has assumed that a great deal of transfer of learning takes place. We assume that if a student is able to compose and present an effective public speech before a class the skills utilized in making that presentation will be transfered to other communication situations. We assume that if a student has learned to read the appropriate classroom reading text that the skills used in reading that source will be transfered to other reading situations. Such assumptions are not supported by research or practical experience. The student must experience the utilization of oral communication skills in a variety of settings with a variety of audiences through a variety of activities. The student must learn to read a variety of printed materials for a variety of purposes.

4. Provide an opportunity to evaluate the effects of the strategies employed in communicating/reading. Strategies used in reading range from skimming and scanning through detailed analysis. In oral communication strategies will vary, also, according to the purpose of the communication. For both reading and oral communication students must learn to examine the effects and success of the employment of a given strategy as well as learn to develop a set of standards by which success can be measured.

And finally, and perhaps most importantly, instruction in both oral communication and reading must enable the teacher and the student to

5. Share in the joy of using language.

Both oral communication and reading are activities related to our thought processes and a means for developing a sense of self and one's relationships to others. In a very real sense these basic tools are the means by which we solve our problems, each providing us with differing symbolic strategies.

> Every human culture, every human society, every human encounter, every human being, must be realized in communication. What we refer to when we refer to "human nature" is nowhere to be found in nature. It is what people have made of themselves, in various cultures, at different times and in different ways, in and through communication. As we communicate, so shall we be. 12

Certainly no subjects in our educational curricula are more deserving of our focused and sustained attention than the basic communication skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

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